

Snowbound by HannahBerrie

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Summary: When El invites Mike to spend the day at the cabin, Hopper finds himself supervising a sleepover he didn't sign up for. Two-shot.

1. Chapter 1

[A/N]: So, I'm pretty sure that canonically, Hopper's cabin only has one bedroom. Through the power of fanfiction and not-caring-that-much, let's just say that for the sake of this story, there's two.

In a rare change of pace, Hopper was on leave from work today. Flo would call him if any emergencies popped up, but that seemed unlikely. Besides, after the events of the last two autumns, every other Hawkins 'emergency' seemed pretty minuscule in comparison.

Hopper's plans for the day: sleeping in, a couple beers, some light reading, coffee and contemplation.

El's plans for his day: not that.

It was early January, which meant that Mike was still on winter break from school. Naturally, Eleven was looking for every possible chance to spend time with him.

Hopper quickly learned that his day wasn't going to go as planned when he awoke to El shaking him out of bed.

"Wake up!" She said eagerly, ignoring his confused grunts and cries of protest.

"Jesus, kid!" Hopper exclaimed, grumpily rubbing the sleep from his eyes, "What's going on?!"

"I wanna see Mike!" El pleaded, "He goes back to school soon!"

"I can drop you off at his house, then," Hopper grumbled, turning to roll back into bed.

"But I want him to come *here*!" She explained, tugging on his shoulder so that he was facing her again.

Hopper sighed and eyed her warily. "Why?"

"He's never been here."

"Because there's not much here," Hopper snorted.

"We have the TV!" El insisted. "And Eggos!"

"So, you just want to watch TV and eat waffles all day with him?"

"Yes!"

"I don't think you two should be on your own out here," Hopper said carefully. "It's not really..."

His brow furrowed as he tried to think of the right word. Appropriate? Safe? Responsible? Considering that Hopper would rarely use those words to describe his own actions, none of them seemed to fit.

"A good idea," he finally settled on. "You should have some kind of supervision."

Supervision, i.e., making sure that his daughter's boyfriend wasn't up to no good. It wasn't that he didn't trust Mike, per say. The kid had certainly proven himself to be valiant on more than one occasion.

Regardless, that still didn't change the fact that Mike was only 13, and Hopper just didn't trust teenage boys, like, at all.

When Hopper had been around Mike's age, his mother was completely convinced that Hopper was on the debate team (he wasn't). And if Mike so much as *thought* of pulling any of the same moves that Hopper had with Chrissy Carpenter back in the day...

In short, Hopper just wanted to take precautions. Precaution #1: Not letting a hormonal teenage boy spend the day alone in a secluded cabin with his daughter. Granted, he had the day off today, but El didn't know that. Spending the day babysitting a pair of teenagers was not exactly what Hopper had in mind for his rare vacation day.

"But you don't work today!" El reminded him. "You could go get him and then stay here! We wouldn't be alone!"

Dammit. "Who told you I had the day off?" Hopper grumbled.

"Will heard you tell his mama so Will told Mike and Mike told me!"

"Will heard me talking to Joyce?"

"Yes! On the phone," El explained, exasperated, "Will says you two always talk."

Hopper wasn't much of a blusher, but he felt his cheeks flare up at that. "Not a lot," he mumbled, rubbing his jaw. "Just sometimes."

El disregarded this. "So, can you bring him?" She pleaded instead, "Please?"

"I dunno, kid..."

"*Please!*" She whimpered, pouted her lower lip, batted her doe-eyes, and with that, Hopper knew that he was done for. Resistance, at this point, was futile. El, as she often did, had won him over.

"Fine," Hopper sighed, "Just let me —"

But by the time Hopper said, "Fine," El had already run out the door. "ThankYouSoMuch!" She exclaimed in one breath, calling out to him from the living room. He could hear her dialing the phone, no doubt to let Mike know the good news.

One of these days, she wasn't going to win him over so easily.

Today wasn't that day, evidently, as around an hour later, Hopper found himself driving Mike back to the cabin with him.

Per Dr. Owens' orders, El was still to be kept in hiding for the rest of the year, which meant that organizing time for Mike and El to be together had to be handled with care. Ted and Karen knew about El, she'd spent plenty of afternoons at the Wheeler home, after all...

...Hopper just usually left out the part about her being telekinetic, a government experiment, or a Russian spy (not that the last one was ever true to begin with, but he digressed).

"Your parents know what you're up to?" Hopper asked Mike, though, in the back of his mind, he realized this was probably something he

should have asked *before* picking the kid up.

"Kinda," Mike replied unconvincingly. "I told them I was going to go hang out with my friends. Dustin said he'd cover for me. My parents don't really care what I do anyways, so it's not a big deal."

"I'm sure they care," Hopper offered.

Mike just shrugged, looked down at his feet, and grumbled, "I guess."

Hopper didn't like the sound of that, but didn't press the issue further. He wasn't much for small talk, and trying to make one-on-one conversation with the boy currently dating your daughter was a little awkward, to say the least.

Thankfully, the drive didn't take long. The morning was still young when Hopper stopped the car on the side road closest to the cabin. The air was brisk and biting-cold, and the sky was blanketed with a thick layer of dark grey clouds. It'd snowed heavily the night before, which left calve-deep snowdrifts throughout the forest.

"Watch your step," Hopper instructed as the two exited his cruiser.

Mike nodded appreciatively. "Thanks again for the ride," he said as the two began the short walk to the cabin.

"Don't mention it," Hopper said, "Was I supposed to let you bike here?"

"I could have!"

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, I could do it!" Mike bolstered. "It's not *that* far!"

"It's a good 20-minute drive, maybe 25."

"I've biked to the quarry before, that's like, just as far away, basically."

"Impressive."

The forest was stunningly still as they walked. The only sound to be heard for miles around was the crush of snow beneath their boots, the distance drum of a woodpecker drilling into a tree, and the occasional brush of dead branches against their coats.

Despite his heavy snow boots, bulky winter coat, pom-pom adorned hat, and knitted wool mittens, Mike's cheeks were getting pink. It was probably from the cold, or maybe the exertion of trudging through all the deep snow. The latter seemed more likely, as he seemed intent on keeping up with Hopper. With every step Hopper took, Mike strained his legs to match his pace. As Hopper was obviously much taller and leaner, the kid was nearly lunging through the snow to keep up with him.

Mike didn't have to try so hard to impress him, if that's what was going on here. Hopper would be lying if he said that it wasn't slightly amusing though.

As Mike lunged about, Hopper became increasingly aware of the rattling sounds coming out of his bulging backpack.

"Whatcha got in the bag there?" Hopper asked conversationally, trying to keep his demeanor as least snoop-like as possible.

"Just some movies, board games, comic books, and stuff," Mike replied, "You know, in case we get bored or anything. I brought Monopoly! It's kinda lame, but you could play with us, if you want."

Hopper gave him a polite smile. "That's okay, kid. I'm sure El has a whole agenda planned for you two, anyway."

Mike brightened at the mention of El's name. "Probably, she's like super good with that kind of stuff," he gushed, "I'm trying to teach her how to make her own D&D campaigns. We're just starting off with basic a basic dungeon crawl, then we're gonna work our way up to intrigue adventures."

"That's nice," Hopper replied, not understanding any of what Mike had just said.

Not much later, the two finally reached the secluded cabin. Hopper

couldn't help but notice the flash of the curtain rustling behind the front window. No doubt El had been waiting there on standby ever since Hopper had left. The thought made him smile in an endearing sort of way.

"Here we are," Hopper announced, causing Mike to grin excitedly. The pair mounted the front steps, approached the cabin door, and stomped the extra snow off their boots. Hopper gave a cautionary glance around the forest before giving his secret knock.

Within seconds (milliseconds, really), El had undone every lock and swung the door wide open. "Hi!" She burst out eagerly, eyes locked on Mike.

"El!" Mike exclaimed. He stepped forward quickly, pulling her into his arms in a big hug. "I missed you!"

"I missed you too!" El responded, squeezing him tightly.

The last time they'd seen each other was Saturday.

Today was Monday.

Hopper had to bite his tongue to keep himself from pointing this out to them.

"You're cold!" El commented, pulling back from Mike to examine his face.

Mike's face flushed even redder as El moved her hands up to cup his cheeks. "I'm fine!" He insisted, "My mom made me wear a billion sweaters."

El gave him a doubtful look. "*Mike*. You're cold."

Hopper, who'd seemingly been invisible to them for the past couple moments, cleared his throat.

"I think we're both pretty cold, so let's all get inside," Hopper cut in, placing a hand on Mike's shoulder. "We're gonna freeze to death out here."

"Yes, come in!" El said eagerly. She took Mike by his mittened hand and pulled him into the cabin. Hopper entered behind them, listening as they chattered away. The kids headed over to the living room (living *area*, really), as he hung up his coat and made his way to the kitchen. Even though he hadn't gotten to sleep in, there was still plenty of time for coffee.

As he started to brew a pot of coffee, El quietly approached him.

"Papa," she whispered, glancing back at the living room, where Mike was in the midst of removing his various layers of outerwear.

"Yes?" Hopper said bemusedly. He already had a pretty good feeling as to where this was going.

"Can you go to your room?" She asked in an odd mixture of both politeness and forcefulness.

"Yeah, I don't think so, kid."

"Why?"

"Where should I put this stuff?" Mike called out, holding up the mass of knitted wool that was his hat, scarf, mittens, and a couple sweaters.

"Anywhere!" Hopper and El chimed back before returning to their own conversation.

"We had a deal, remember?" Hopper reminded her. The coffee pot finished brewing, so he grabbed a spare mug to fill. "Supervision? Remember that?"

"You can supervise," El said, "From your room. You can hear."

"Why all the privacy?" Hopper looked her in the eye as he took a sip of his coffee. "I thought that you were gonna do is just watch TV and eat waffles."

El's face flushed pink. "Yes. but..."

"No buts," Hopper smirked as he ruffled her hair, ignoring her

narrowed eyes and frustrated pout. He grabbed the latest morning paper and moved to sit at the dining table, well within view of the living area. "I think I'm going to be comfortable right here," he said, taking another sip of coffee.

El looked exasperated but defeated. He heard her grumble under her breath as she returned to Mike, who had settled on stacking all his items in a makeshift pile in the corner.

Hopper could tell that El wasn't thrilled with the whole situation (she kept giving him looks from the living room), but she got over it soon enough. Before long, she and Mike were back to conversing with ease, their soft chatter serving as a kind of white noise buffer for Hopper.

Even though it was his day off, Hopper found that reading the newspaper led to a slippery slope of events; reading made him think about the latest cases, thinking about the latest cases made him frustrated that he hadn't made any new leads lately, and being frustrated that he hadn't made any new leads lately made him dust off a few cold case files that he kept lying around the cabin and get to work.

What could he say? Old habits died hard. Besides, it gave him something to do while he supervised the kids, and was a far more challenging puzzle to solve than the crosswords in *The Hawkins Post*.

While Hopper absentmindedly scrounged over case files, Mike and El crafted a makeshift fort out of couch cushions, one of the dining chairs, and the sheets from El's bed. They spent most of the rest of the day inside there, goofing off and joking around.

As...*eventful* as this morning had been, Hopper had to admit that it was good to hear El laughing and having a good time. After everything that she'd gone through growing up, some basic happiness was the least of what she deserved.

The kids spent their day TV (El introduced him to her favorite soap opera: *All My Children*, to which Mike replied, "This is kinda cheesy," but continued watching anyway), playing board games (Hopper had never heard the two bicker until El refused to play Mike after landing

on his Boardwalk hotel, stating that she "didn't want to," to which Mike replied, "You have to," to which El exclaimed, "I hate this dumb game"), and snacking (after the Monopoly incident, Hopper directed Mike to the secret Eggo stash — after El was presented with a stack of candy-covered waffles courtesy of Mike Wheeler, the two exchanged earnest apologies and all was forgiven).

The day flew by faster than Hopper had expected and before long, it was evening: time to take Mike back home. "We better head out," Hopper announced, setting down his files and rubbing at his temples. His brain hurt from staring at so much information and getting nowhere for so long. He felt like he'd blinked and watched the day disappear, and if it wasn't for his watch reading 6 PM, he wouldn't have believed that much time had passed at all.

El gave a small whine from inside the fort, but the two kids emerged, looking quite glum. Mike started gathering his things together as El reluctantly helped. Hopper grabbed his coat and keys as he moved to stand by the front door. He sincerely hoped that the drive back wouldn't be too bad — at night, the wet snow froze the roads into ice, which made trying to drive over it absolute hell. He was going to have to take it slow, avoid side roads...

"Do you have to go?" El asked. The two had finished getting Mike's things together, and she was now in the midst of giving Mike a goodbye hug.

"I don't want to," Mike mumbled back, his face buried in her ever-growing curly hair.

"You two can see each other this weekend, or something," Hopper reminded them, checking his watch.

"I'll call you tomorrow," Mike assured Eleven, pulling back to smile at her.

"Okay!" El beamed back. She rose on tip-toe and kissed the corner of his mouth, causing Mike to smile bashfully.

Their eyes met then, and Hopper couldn't help but notice the familiar heart-eyed look that El had been sporting lately, the way that Mike

was now slowly moving in, and how obviously obvious it was where this was all headed.

Hopper decided to cut things off by clearing his throat. "You ready to head out, Mike?" He asked as the two flinched apart.

"Uh, yeah!" Mike responded, flushing red. He quickly put on his winter layers, grabbed his backpack, and gave El one last goodbye hug before crossing the living room to stand at Hopper's side. "Sorry," he mumbled, glancing up at Hopper anxiously.

Hopper just nodded and gave Mike a light pat on the shoulder. Slipping on his winter gloves, he readied himself for the winter chill, opened the front door...

...And instantly realized that outside, all hell had broken loose.

2. Chapter 2

While Hopper had been absorbed with his case files and Mike and El had been absorbed with each other, a lake-effect snowstorm had completely taken over Hawkins. The forest had been swallowed up in a hectic mess of billowing snowdrifts, falling sleet, and howling wind. The world beyond the front step of the cabin had been reduced to a dark void, accented only with the snowflakes illuminated by the porch light.

"Shit," Hopper muttered, dragging a hand down his jaw. He attempted to take a step forward, but the snow on the porch was already a couple feet deep.

He turned to the kids, who were both looking up at him worriedly. "Wait here," he instructed, "I'm going to be right back."

"Where are you going?" El asked, placing a hand on his arm. Her eyes were wide with concern, and she was starting to shake from the chill entering the cabin.

"I'm just gonna check on the car," Hopper explained, placing his hand over hers, "I'll be back in 10 minutes, tops."

"Be careful," El replied, "Don't be stupid."

"I'll try," Hopper smiled gently and gave her a small nudge.

"Good luck," Mike offered, looking up at Hopper earnestly.

Hopper nodded in response, zipped up his coat to his neck, and carefully stepped outside.

The snow was well up to his knees, which, considering Hopper's height, made it pretty deep. He kept his head low as he trudged through the forest, wind and snow pummeling him from all sides. The walk back to the road felt far longer than it did earlier, and when he finally made it to the car, he realized the entire walk out here was futile.

Snow had piled up so high that the car's door handles were almost

completely obscured. To try and shovel the car out would take all night, and even then, there was no way that he'd be able to drive in horrific conditions such as these.

Great.

With a series of muttered curses, Hopper hurried back to the cabin. By the time he'd reached it, his face felt numb, his legs were sore, and he was almost certain that his entire body had turned into a popsicle.

Mike and El were huddled side-by-side when he entered, clasping each other's hands. They'd apparently disassembled their fort while waiting for him, and were now anxiously seated on the couch. When the door burst open and Hopper rushed in, they leapt up, shoulders slumping in relief.

"Papa!" El exclaimed. She ran to him, hugging him tightly despite how cold he was. "You're back!"

Hopper slammed the door shut behind him before returning El's hug. "It's alright, kid," he assured her, rubbing a hand up and down her back.

"It's scary out there," El mumbled, sounding slightly sheepish. She took a step back and rejoined Mike's side, looking slightly more at ease.

"Yeah," Hopper nodded, "There's no way we're going out there tonight."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked, brow furrowed.

Hopper eyed both of them and took a deep breath. "It means Mike's gonna have to stay here. I can't drive in this."

El gave a small gasp before clamping her mouth shut tightly, absolutely shaking with excitement.

"Really?" Mike asked, sounding completely thrilled.

"Yes," Hopper sighed, "Your mother's gonna kill me, though, so there's that."

"It'll be okay!" Mike offered quickly, "I'll just call her and say I'm sleeping over at Dustin's!"

"Yeah!" El agreed, nodding enthusiastically.

At this point, it wasn't like Hopper had any other options. "Fine," he sighed, voice heavy with resolve.

Mike and El exchanged a pair of grins before Mike darted away to go use the phone.

El was still shaking in place, looking so excited, Hopper almost worried that she would combust.

"Don't look so happy about this," Hopper told her, only half joking.

El just shook her head. "I'm not!" She squeaked out, trying (and failing) not to smile.

"Uh huh," Hopper said dryly, "I'm sure you're completely torn up by the whole thing."

El nodded, eyes sparkling. "It's really sad. Poor Mike."

Moments later, Mike returned from his phone call. "Alright, we're good!" He announced confidently, "I handled it."

"Good job!" El congratulated him (for...making a phone call? Hopper was honestly confused).

"Thanks!" Mike replied, turning to El with a dopey grin.

"Alright then," Hopper muttered, already mentally formulating a plan for the rest of the night. "I'm pretty sure we've got a spare sleeping bag around here that you could use."

He walked away from the kids and moved to the secret latch in the middle of the living area floorboards. With a tug, he pulled the door open and descended into the cramped, biting cold crawlspace. As he began searching through the numerous towers of boxes and junk, he could still hear El as she spoke up from above.

"Papa, Mike could sleep in my bed," She offered, kneeling before the crawlspace, "There's room! We could share."

Hopper gave a bark of a laugh. "Yeah, that's not happening."

"But—"

"No buts," Hopper opened a box labeled *camping gear*, but it only contained a broken tent pole and a couple fishing bobbers. Ok then. "I think Mike will be just fine in the living room."

"Can I sleep in the living room, too?" El asked.

"No," Hopper answered.

"El could sleep on the couch, and I could sleep on the floor," Mike suggested.

"No."

"Mike and I could sleep on the floor together."

"No."

"If we went in El's room, she could sleep in her bed, and I could like, sleep on the floor *near* her bed."

"No."

"We could sleep on the floor by my bed together."

At this point, Hopper was pretty sure that he was going to have an aneurysm.

"No!" He repeated, just as he finally found the sleeping bag (it was stuffed into a box labeled *misc. stuff*). He came back out of the cellar crawl space, closed the latch behind him, and rose to his feet, dusting all the cobwebs off his legs. He really had to clean this place up sometime. "Mike can sleep on the couch, I'm going to sleep in my room, and you —," He pointed to El, "Are going to sleep in your room. Alright?"

"Alright," Mike and El echoed dejectedly.

"Great, glad that's settled." Hopper handed the sleeping bag to Mike, who turned to move over to the couch.

"Wait," El's brow furrowed, "Do we have to go to bed now? It's only six-four-five."

Oh. Right.

Hopper hesitated. "I guess not," he relented.

"We can watch more TV," Mike suggested. "I bought some movies."

"Okay!" El chirped back.

While the two returned to the couch, Hopper realized that he was now going to have to prepare something for them to eat. If he had known that Mike was going to be spending the night, he would have attempted to get something nicer, but the surprise snowstorm meant that their meal would have to consist of frozen TV dinners. Thankfully, he had enough for all of them.

Hopper headed into the kitchen. As he took the frozen packages out of the freezer, Mike and El sat beside each other on the couch.

"Are you sure you wanna watch *Sixteen Candles* again?" Hopper heard Mike ask.

"Yes," El replied.

"But we watched it last time."

"I like it."

Why Mike even owned a copy of *Sixteen Candles*, Hopper wasn't exactly sure. He was pretty certain that either Nancy or El had something to do with it. Either way, any Monopoly-esque crisis was averted when Mike gave in and put his copy of *Sixteen Candles* into the VHS player.

Perhaps he was just being paranoid, but Hopper found it increasingly

difficult to concentrate on cooking dinner while his daughter was cozying up to her boyfriend on the couch. While earlier, the two had been mostly tucked out of eye range and Hopper had been distracted with case files, now he had nothing to do but watch and listen while he waited by the oven.

It took everything within Hopper to not butt in when El leaned in to whisper something into Mike's ear (*what* were they talking about?), or when Mike yawned and *almost* wrapped his arm around her as he stretched (that old move? really?), or when El nuzzled her head into his shoulder and smiled (*there was nothing wrong with cuddling*, Hopper had to tell himself several times).

25 nerve-wracking minutes later, Hopper had successfully assembled three TV dinners. He called the kids over to eat, allowing them to take the two dining chairs while he leaned against the kitchen counter.

Sixteen Candles was still paused on the TV, and as the trio continued to eat, Mike kept glancing over at it, distracted.

"Hey," he said suddenly, turning to look at Hopper.

Hopper eyed him back. "Yes?"

"Have you ever seen *Star Wars*?"

"That's that one space movie, right?"

"Yeah!"

"Then no."

Mike frowned. "What about *Ghostbusters*?"

"Nope."

"*Tron*?"

"Nope."

"*E.T.*?"

"Listen, kid, I don't really go to the movies much," Hopper admitted. "I usually just catch whatever's on TV."

Consequently, that meant that Hopper had been unwillingly watching a lot of *All My Children* lately, but he decided to leave that fact unmentioned.

"You should watch more movies," Mike insisted, "They're really good." He took another bite of his Salisbury steak and continued, pushing the food into the corner of his mouth, "We could watch them together! I already showed them to El, and she really liked them."

El nodded in agreement. "I did. Mike is good at picking out movies."

"Really?" Hopper asked as Mike blushed modestly.

"I just go to the rental store a lot," he said, "and the theater."

"You're still really good," El gushed, looking across the table at Mike as if he was the most enthralling thing since the creation of sliced bread.

Hopper briefly eyed El's heart-eyed gaze before turning his attention back to Mike. The boy was looking up at him earnestly, anxiously, and in that moment, Hopper recognized the same drive that he'd seen in Mike earlier this morning, when they were walking through the snow. Mike wanted Hopper's approval, he wanted to *impress* him.

"I'll tell ya' what, kid," Hopper said slowly, "If you guys can find a movie that I like, I'll watch it with you."

"Really?" Mike gawked.

"Why not," Hopper shrugged, "Besides, I'm curious to know what you've been filling El's head with these days," he added jokingly.

El stuck out her tongue at Hopper, while Mike was already hurrying to finish his dinner. "I brought a lot!" He said excitedly. At the rate in which he was eating, Hopper was genuinely concerned that Mike was going to choke. Miraculously, he didn't.

"We should show him *Star Wars*," El remarked, also now hurrying to

finish her dinner, "That's the best one."

"Not *Sixteen Candles*?" Mike teased.

El nudged him from across the table.

After dinner, the kids got the movie set up while Hopper cleaned up. The storm was growing louder and ever-the-more furious outside, so Hopper lit the living room fireplace and grabbed some extra blankets.

While Mike seemed excited about the whole thing, a part of Hopper worried that El was secretly resentful. As much as he wanted to protect her, he didn't want to be *completely* suffocating.

Hopper offered to make some popcorn for the kids, so before the movie started, he headed back into the kitchen to pop some kernels. El, who was endlessly fascinated by the concept of popcorn, offered to help.

As the kernel-filled pot warmed on the stove, El held its handle tightly. Her eyes were narrowed with steadfast determination, as if she dared to look away she would miss the big moment when the kernels exploded to life.

Hopper looked back at Mike, who was currently fast-forwarding through the commercials on the VHS tape, before mumbling to El, "You doing okay, kid?"

El glanced up at him, perplexed. "Yes. Why?"

"I don't wanna..." Hopper hesitated, searching for the right way to phrase the sentence, "Ruin the movie, for you guys, or anything."

"Ruin it?" El echoed, turning to look back at the pot, "How?"

"You know," Hopper said unhelpfully, gesturing back to Mike, "Being with you guys."

"You were with us earlier," El said dryly, "Supervision? At the table?"

It was her version of sarcasm, the way her voice remained so flat, and yet questioning. It made Hopper chuckle, and he gave her a playful

nudge. "I know. I just...I don't want you to hate me, alright?"

"I don't hate you," El replied. "You just worry too much."

"I don't worry too much!"

El gave him a look.

"I just want you safe," Hopper amended, "You're still my little girl."

El smiled shyly as her cheeks flushed pink. Before she could reply, the first kernel began to pop, and she gasped excitedly.

5 minutes later, they had a big bowl of popcorn for the three of them to share. El and Hopper moved back to the couch and took their seats. El sat right in the middle, keeping the bowl of popcorn seated on her lap.

"Are you ready?" Mike asked enthusiastically, to which Hopper and El nodded. Mike pressed 'play' on the VHS player and quickly joined them on the couch, grinning like a kid on Christmas morning.

Hopper would never have considered himself a big sci-fi or fantasy enthusiast, but he wound up enjoying the movie more than he thought he would. Mike was eager to explain all the confusing technical aspects of it, and El was amused to point out that Hopper was just like Han, and that Dustin had the perfect Chewbacca impression.

By the time the film ended, the popcorn bowl was emptied, and it was well after nine o'clock. As Hopper got off the couch to turn off the TV, Mike and El looked up at him expectantly.

"Did you like it?" El asked at the same time that Mike asked, "What was your favorite part?"

"It was good," Hopper admitted, "I think the parts with the lightsabers were pretty cool."

"*Lightsaber*," Mike corrected, while El giggled.

"*Lightsaber*," Hopper repeated, to which Mike grinned.

"Mike says I have the force," El told Hopper proudly.

"Not the *actual* force," Mike added, "But basically."

"We're going to be Han and Leia for next Halloween," El continued.

"I thought Leia liked Luke?" Hopper asked, brow furrowed.

"NO!" Mike and El cried out, faces scrunched up in disgust.

"Alright, then!" Hopper held back a laugh as held up his hands in defense.

"You'll have to see the other two," Mike said.

"Maybe next time."

"So, Mike can come over again?" El asked excitedly.

"*Maybe*," Hopper cautioned, though internally, he already knew the answer was more along the lines of 'probably, most likely, definitely, yes,' especially if El had anything to say about it.

The clock on the wall read 9:30, reminding Hopper just how late it was getting. "Alright, it's getting late," he stated, "We gotta get you guys to bed."

"Already?" El pouted.

"Already," Hopper echoed. He motioned for Mike to follow him towards his room. "C'mon kid, you can borrow something to sleep in," he offered.

Mike nodded and got off the couch. He gave El a small smile before following Hopper back to his room.

Hopper walked over to his dresser and dug around before finding an old t-shirt and pair of flannel sweatpants.

"They'll probably be a little big on you, but I think you'll manage," he said, pulling the items out of his drawer and handing them to Mike.

"Thanks," Mike replied, taking the clothes.

Hopper nodded and turned to leave his bedroom, allowing Mike some privacy to get changed. He was moving to the doorway when Mike stopped him.

"Hey, Hopp?"

"Yeah?" Hopper turned to look at him. The kid was still standing by the dresser, holding the pile of clothes and fidgeting in place.

Mike hesitated slightly before saying, "Thanks for letting me stay here."

"It's nothing, kid, really," Hopper assured him, "I just gotta make sure you're safe."

"I know, but I just wanted to say," Mike continued, words spilling out faster as he started to babble, "Thanks for like, spending time with us and whatever. I know it must be super boring for you."

"It's not boring," Hopper said truthfully. "I had fun with you guys."

Mike snorted. "That's a first."

Hopper frowned. "What do you mean?"

Mike hesitated again, looking uncertain as to whether or not he should keep talking. After a moment though, the words came tumbling out even faster than before. "It's just — my dad never wants to watch movies with me, or play D&D. He doesn't even care about all the campaigns I make, even when I worked really hard on them!"

Hopper was slightly taken aback by the outburst, but as he let it sink in, he wasn't exactly surprised, either.

My parents don't really care what I do anyways, so it's not a big deal.

I'm sure they care.

I guess.

Hopper spoke carefully. "Well, maybe he just doesn't understand it all. Did you try explaining it to him?"

"Yeah, kind of," Mike averted his gaze and shuffled his feet, "But he just thinks it's all dumb 'kids' stuff.' He wants me to try out for basketball next year. I *hate* basketball."

"What about your mom?" Hopper asked, "Do you try talking to her about these kinds of things?"

Mike shrugs. "She doesn't care. I mean, she cares about me, but I can't really talk to her. I can't tell her about The Upside Down or anything! I can barely talk to her about El! She just cares about like, school, which is boring."

Hopper was a little unsure what to do with all this information. Most prominently, his heart went out to the kid. After years of shutting himself out from the world, Hopper definitely knew how hard it was to have no one to confide in. Mike was still a kid, and for him to already feel so isolated was worrying, to say the least.

It was in that moment that Hopper, ever-the-protector, took it upon himself to make sure Mike didn't have to go down the winding, miserable path of isolation that Hopper himself had frequented far too often.

"Well, listen," Hopper finally said, causing Mike to look back up at him, "If you need someone to talk to about stuff, you can talk to me."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Hopper shrugged, "Anything, you know, guy stuff, whatever you want. Can't promise to be much help when it comes to girls, though."

"Well, that's what Steve's for," Mike said, before hastily correcting himself with, "I mean, yeah, that'd be sweet!"

Hopper decided to let the Steve comment slide. He crossed the room and gave Mike an affectionate hair ruffle. "You're a good kid," Hopper stated firmly, looking him in the eye, "Don't forget that."

Mike gave a small smile. "Thanks."

Hopper nodded and left then, leaving Mike with some privacy to get

changed.

El was still in the living room, setting up the couch with some extra pillows and blankets for Mike. When she saw Hopper emerge, she looked up expectantly. "Is everything okay?"

Having that talk with Mike stirred up a new swell of emotions within Hopper. Looking at El's face, still so young, he suddenly felt overwhelmed by the need to make sure that she never felt as shut out from her family as Mike did with his.

"You know you can talk to me, right, kid?" Hopper asked.

"Yes..." El looked at him warily. "What's wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong," Hopper assured her, "I'm just making sure."

El wrinkled her face up in a bemused sort of way. "Okay," she replied, turning back to her task of getting the blankets to lie *just right* on the couch.

Hopper watched her work for a few minutes before saying something he hoped he wasn't going to regret later.

"You know," he said with a sigh, turning his head up to look at the ceiling, "If you two promise to behave, I guess you could both sleep in the living room."

El gasped, eyes wide with disbelief and hesitant excitement. "Really?"

"Sure."

El dashed over to Hopper, wrapping her arms around him in a tight hug. "*Thank you!*" She exclaimed, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"I'm gonna keep my door open, though," Hopper warned her.

"Uh huh!"

"So you two better not be up talking all night."

"Okay!"

"Or watching TV, or anything."

"Okay!"

"You need to get some sleep."

"We will!" El hopped up on tip-toe to kiss his cheek, and she was actually so excited that Hopper saw her hover off the ground for a moment. "Thank you, Papa."

"You're welcome, kid," Hopper replied, blushing for the second time that day. He ruffled her mop of curly hair, and El giggled happily.

Mike came out from Hopper's room, sporting the pair of borrowed night clothes. They were several sizes too big, but it was better than nothing. "What's going on?" He asked, looking back and forth between Hopper and El.

"I can sleep here!" El explained, motioning to the living room floor. "With you!"

"Awesome!" Mike exclaimed, before glancing over at Hopper and adding, more soberingly, "I mean, that sounds good."

Hopper gave him a smile before he began to help them prepare for bed. More blankets were brought out, the lamps were extinguished, and the fireplace coals dwindled. A nest of blankets, pillows, and the sleeping bag was crafted in the middle of the living room, and as Mike and El crawled inside, Hopper turned off the last lamp and walked towards his own room.

"Goodnight," Hopper called out to them.

"Night!" Mike and El chimed back.

Despite Hopper's previous conditions, Mike and El did stay up late talking. Even over the muted roar of the storm outside, Hopper could hear their soft whispers floating through the slightly ajar doorway of his bedroom. However, their secretive conversations didn't cause all the alarm that it had earlier that day.

You just worry too much.

He did. Hopper worried and protected and cared for what he loved so adamantly that it became his undoing. He knew this no matter how much he tried to ignore it.

But he was changing, learning.

El was growing up, yet another thing that Hopper knew no matter how much he tried not to think about it. She was going to move on, make her own choices, and become her own person. That included whom she wanted to date. And honestly, if she was going to be seeing someone, Hopper had to admit that he couldn't think of anyone better than Mike.

His thoughts faded to black as Hopper drifted off to sleep, listening to the sounds of muffled snowfall and murmured laughter.

When Hopper awoke the next morning, the storm had ceased. The wind was still, the sky had cleared, and several feet of fresh powder had accumulated. Hopper pulled himself out of bed with a sigh, prematurely exhausted knowing that the strenuous task of shoveling a path to the car lay ahead of him.

There was still time for coffee first though, that was a given.

As Hopper quietly exited his room and entered the living area, he could see that Mike and El were still fast asleep. The faint winter sun that shown through the window illuminated them as they lay on the floor — a tangled heap of wool blankets, cotton bedsheets, and flannel pajamas.

Mike, snoring, was sprawled out in a way that made his limbs seem even lankier than usual. His hair was splayed out on the pillow beneath his head, and his arm was loosely wrapped around Eleven. El, also snoring, though not as loudly, was cuddled up beside Mike. Her head was rested on top of his chest, her arms were wrapped tightly around his torso, and her lips held a faint smile as she slept blissfully.

At a previous time, the sight might have made Hopper lock into protective, preventive, suffocative mode.

But now, on this subdued winter morning? He felt his heart warm.

El was happy, she was safe, and she was loved.

At the end of the day, that was all that Hopper could ever hope for.